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C O N F I D E N T I A L KATHMANDU 000373

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DEPT FOR SA/INS
NSC FOR RICHELSOPH AND MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/07/2016
TAGS: PGOV PTER PHUM NP
SUBJECT: MAOIST VIOLENCE AND ALL-NEPAL STRIKE CONTINUE ON
EVE OF ELECTIONS

REF: A. KATHMANDU 331

1B. 05 KATHMANDU 2556

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (U) This cable is an action request, see paragraph 12.

SUMMARY

12. (SBU) The Maoist-called nationwide February 5-11 strike continues to envelop the country in a state of fear highlighted by the Maoist murder of a taxi driver near Kathmandu and continued Maoist violence and multiple bombings around the country. The government has declared February 8 a holiday and will hold elections in 36 of the 58 municipalities, but with only 15 percent of seats being contested. The political parties claim that they will demonstrate during elections and canvass house-to-house to disrupt the elections but will not otherwise obstruct the polls. End Summary.

MAOISTS KILL TAXI DRIVER, STRIKE SILENCES CAPITAL - EFFECTS
NATIONWIDE

13. (SBU) The Maoists' February 5-11 all-Nepal strike (bandh) continued to be largely observed throughout the country on February 6 and 7. Suspected Maoists shot point-blank and killed a taxi driver in Lalitpur (inside Kathmandu's ring road) around 6:30 pm local time on February 6. While traffic on the roads was already greatly reduced, even fewer vehicles ventured out on February 7 following this assassination. In Kathmandu, educational institutions and factories remained completely closed, though many small businesses on side-streets were open. In Pokhara (mid-west Nepal), shops and businesses remained closed despite efforts by security forces to have them operate. Reports indicate that the Maoist bandh paralyzed normal life in towns throughout the country, including Dhading (central Nepal), Tanahun (eastern Nepal), Rajbiraj (western Nepal), Nawalparasi (western Nepal), Mahottari (central Nepal), Janakpur (eastern Nepal), and Syangja (western Nepal). Traffic on the major highways

has been minimal, though some vehicles between Biratnagar and Itahari in eastern Nepal moved with security escorts. Maoist road blocks and bombs have disrupted traffic along the Hetauda-Pathalaiya stretch on the road from India to Kathmandu. Editorials in most major newspapers have called on the Maoists to stop their bandh as it is hurting Nepal's people.

MAOISTS ATTACK ARMY CAMP NEAR KATHMANDU; VIOLENCE CONTINUES

¶4. (C) There were several incidents of Maoist violence against security forces on February 6. Maoists attacked a Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) base camp and Municipal Office in Panauti, just 30 kilometers east of Kathmandu, within the Kathmandu Valley. Police sources stated Maoists killed two RNA and one Nepal Police officer. News reports indicate an RNA night vision helicopter was involved in repelling the attacks. In Dhalikhel, on the rim of the Kathmandu Valley, Maoists bombed the District Education Office. A Maoist attack on an RNA post in Udayapur in the eastern terai resulted in three Armed Police Force (APF) and two RNA casualties. Maoists ambushed a convoy near Nepalganj, Banke District, far western terai, injuring three security personnel. A Maoist bomb killed one and injured four members of the APF along the highway in Mahendragnagar in the far west. Maoists detonated a powerful bomb at the Land Revenue Office in the eastern city of Damak. In one positive development, Maoists released the Chief District Officer of Palpa who had been abducted on January 31, though they claimed to still hold seven police and one soldier (ref A).

GOVERNMENT CALL TO VOTE NOT AN OFFICIAL ORDER

¶5. (C) Lokman Singh Karki, Chief Secretary of His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMGN), issued a controversial verbal order on February 6 for Secretaries in all the Ministries to instruct their employees to vote in the February 8 elections.

Ramkrishna Timalisina, Spokesperson for the Supreme Court, told Emboff that the Chief Secretary's statement to the other Secretaries of all the Ministries was a "verbal and personal

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order," not an official government statement. He added that as there was no mandatory government order to vote, HMGN civil servants would have to decide on their own whether to abstain from voting. Timalisina explained that the Supreme Court had quashed a writ filed against Karki's statement as it was not an official government statement. Kabi Raj Khanal, Under Secretary of the Home Ministry, explained that Karki had advised the Secretaries of all the Ministries to convey the order for their employees to vote to fulfill their duty as government employees and to convey government support for the polls. Khanal added, however, that it was up to individual HMGN employees whether to participate.

PARTY ALLIANCE WILL NOT OBSTRUCT POLLS

¶6. (C) The political parties plan to boycott the elections by conducting a house-to-house campaign and organizing protest rallies on election day but said they would not obstruct polls. Jhalanath Khanal, Central Committee Member of the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), told Emboff the Parties would organize corner meetings and protest programs but would not obstruct the polls.

Similarly, Minendra Rizal, Spokesperson for Nepali Congress-Democratic (NC-D), said the Parties would go door-to-door requesting people not to vote, conduct protest demonstrations, but not otherwise obstruct the election process.

ONLY 15 PERCENT OF POSTS BEING CONTESTED IN MUNICIPAL POLLS

¶7. (C) An Embassy source with Nepal's Election Commission provided statistics that illustrate the municipal elections will prove meaningless. He reported that of 4,146 posts to be elected, only 618 would be contested, or 15 percent of the total posts. No candidates had filed for 54 percent of the seats; candidates in the remaining 31 percent of seats were elected unopposed. The total number of registered voters in the 618 races, which would occur in 36 of the 58 municipalities, was 1,480,238 (Nepal's total population is approximately 26 million).

ATMOSPHERE OF FEAR IN SOUTH-CENTRAL NEPAL, FEW CANDIDATES

¶8. (C) An Embassy source in Bhairawaha (south-central Nepal) reported a heavy security force presence in the city and commented on the lack of candidates running in the municipal elections. He warned that citizens had heard rumors of imminent Maoist attacks in Bhairawaha and Butwal; large numbers of army personnel were seen arriving in the area. The Chief District Officer of Butwal reported hearing gun-fire and bomb blasts in Butwal the evening of February 6.

Our source explained that in Bhairawaha there were only two mayoral candidates and that in half of 13 wards there were no ward commissioner candidates. He commented that the likely "winner" of the mayoral race would be a member of the Nepal Sadvabana Party, which supports the King, and who had a reputation for corruption.

RESISTANCE TO USE OF SCHOOLS FOR POLLING BOOTHS

¶9. (U) Although public schools have been used as polling stations in the past, Umesh Shrestha, President of the Private and Border School Association of Nepal (PABSON), has argued publicly that schools should not be used for municipal polls due to potential Maoist damage to school facilities. In Kathmandu Valley the government ordered 144 schools to

close on February 7 and 8 to be used as polling booths. By the end of February 6, the RNA had taken control of 32 schools. A February 2 United Nations statement said that the government's decision to locate polling booths inside schools was a new threat to the already beleaguered schools and urged the government to withdraw its decision to use schools for the polls. The government rejected the request, saying the UN had no right to advise HMGN on the issue. Sambhu Thapu, President of the Nepal Bar Association, complained that the Election Commission had no legal sanction and could not violate the constitutional rights of citizens.

GOVERNMENT DECLARES ELECTION HOLIDAY, RESTRICTS VEHICLE MOVEMENT

¶10. (U) HMGN has declared February 8 a national holiday in order to facilitate the municipal polls. In Kathmandu HMGN has announced that only vehicles with special permits will be allowed on the streets between the hours of 6:00 am and 10:00 pm.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) The Maoist shooting of a taxi driver on Kathmandu's ring road and the Panauti attack raised the level of fear of Maoist violence in the Kathmandu Valley. The nationwide observance of the Maoist strike further illustrates the sway Maoist violence currently has over Nepal's populace. The fact that no candidates filed to run in over 54 percent of the available municipal election seats is due primarily to fear of the Maoists but also reflects a lack of support for the King and the King's election plan. The consequences are a meaningless election that will do nothing to restore democracy. What remains to be seen is whether the Parties' tolerance for Maoist violence will continue after the polls.

ACTION REQUEST

¶12. (SBU) Post recommends that the Department spokesperson issue the following press statement on Nepal's February 8 municipal elections by mid-morning on February 8, Washington time. Post also provides suggested question and answers as press guidance.

Begin Text of Suggested Press Statement.

Polls in Nepal Prove Meaningless

Today's nationwide municipal elections in Nepal, called by the King, proved meaningless. The government detained large numbers of political activists before the elections, major political parties boycotted them, and an insufficient pool of candidates participated. As a result, Nepal is no closer to restoring democracy than it was before the polls opened.

Maoist intimidation and killing of candidates during the campaign also marred the vote. The United States condemns these actions, which underscored the Maoists' adherence to violence and their position outside the political mainstream.

We urge the King to release all political detainees and initiate a dialogue with the political parties to return Nepal to democracy. Such reconciliation remains the best way to address the Maoist insurgency and to provide security and hope for Nepal's people.

End Text of Suggested Press Statement.

Begin Text of Suggested Press Questions and Answers.

--What is the position of the U.S. on the nationwide municipal elections on February 8?

The United States does not view the municipal elections as meaningful. The government detained large numbers of political activists before the elections, who remain in detention; major political parties boycotted the elections; and an insufficient pool of candidates participated.

--Do these represent a move by the King to return to democracy?

Unfortunately, for the reasons outlined above, Nepal is no closer to restoring democracy than it was before the polls.

--What impact have the Maoists had?

Maoist intimidation and killing of candidates is reprehensible and also marred the vote.

The United States condemns these actions, which underscored the Maoists' adherence to violence and their position outside the political mainstream.

--What is the U.S. view of the 12-point understanding the political parties have with the Maoists?

We view the 12 point understanding with real skepticism, given the Maoist failure to give up violence and enter the political mainstream.

End Text of Suggested Press Questions and Answers.

MORIARTY